Crossing Paths

WITH WILDLIFE IN WASHINGTON TOWNS AND CITIES Winter 2007

Wildlife license plates are benefiting species

By Dr. Jeff Koenings, WDFW Director

A year ago, five wildlife-themed Washington motor vehicle license plate backgrounds went on sale, offering motorists a way to show support for state species and help fund wildlife management activities provided by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW).

The wildlife plates have proven popular—in fact, the bald eagle design was the top-seller among 18 theme license plates introduced in 2006. A total of 2,090 bald eagle backgrounds were sold by the end of the year.

Along with the eagle plate, two other wildlife-theme plates featuring an elk and an orca whale were among the top five most-popular specialty license plate designs. The elk design sold 2,085 plates and the orca design sold 1,724. In addition, 828 black bear designs and 730 mule deer plates also were sold.

A total of 7,457 wildlife-theme license plates were sold in 2006, with $118,000 netted for wildlife-management programs and the remainder of the proceeds paying Department of Licensing costs to implement the new wildlife-theme license plate options.

Each new special-design license plate costs $40, in addition to regular vehicle licensing fees, and $30 in conjunction with vehicle-

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Feeders can draw color to your winter landscape

Photo by Helen Engle

There's nothing like the red, yellow or blue feathers of a bird drawn to a backyard feeder to brighten up winter's monochromatic landscape.

Even the natural forage purists among us, knowing full well that birds can do without our help, will hang a suet cake or two just to see that flash of color and animation during these short, gray days.

Contrary to a popular notion, you can start and stop feeding birds in the winter without harming them. The only rationale is for your own viewing consistency, since it takes time for birds to find your offerings each time.

Birds do not become dependent on one winter feeding station. Most visit a number of foraging spots – natural and supplemental – in their daily search for food. When they find that newly hung suet cake, it's no different

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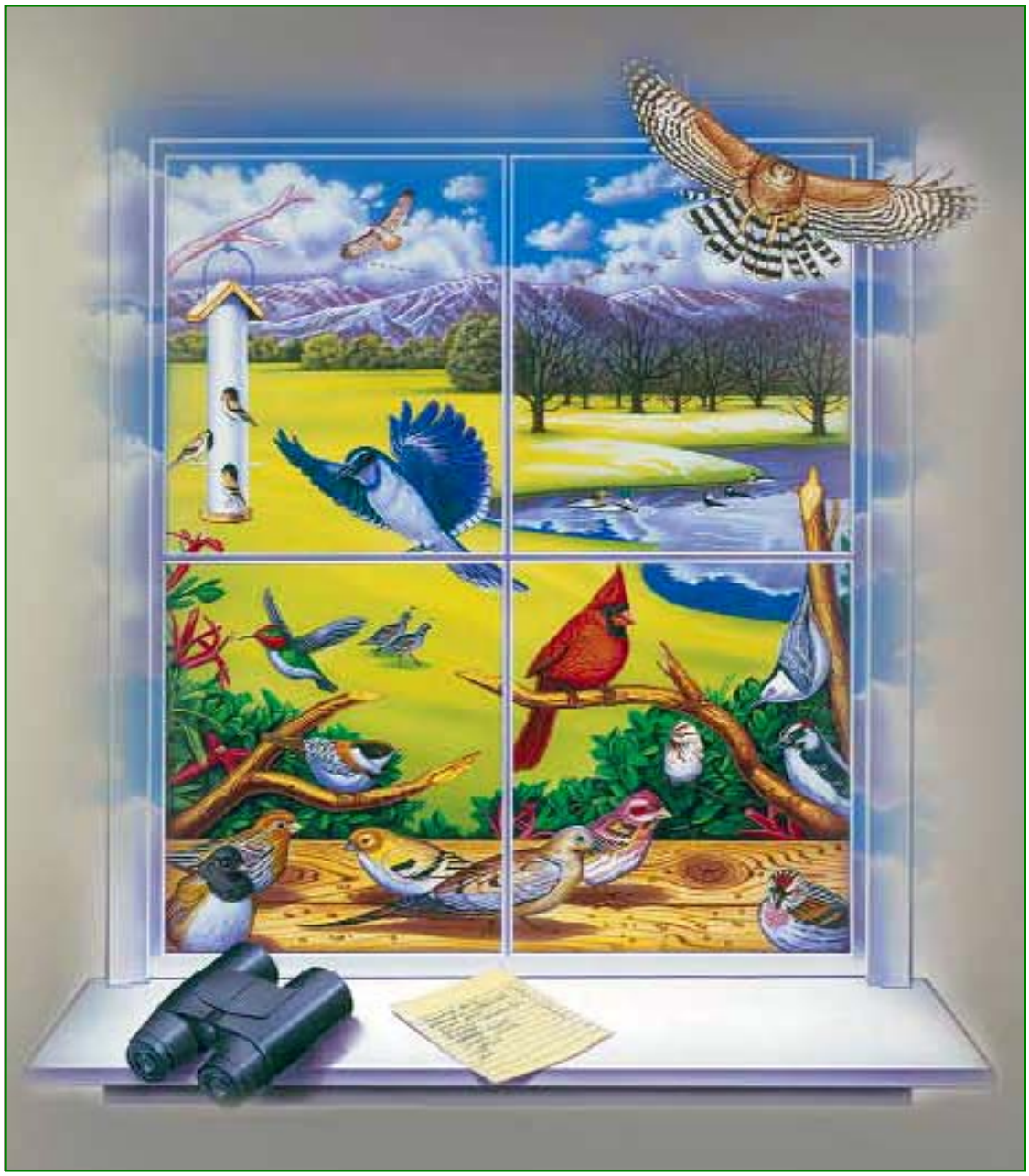
"Count Birds for the Record" Feb. 16-19



The tenth annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC), Feb. 16-19, is a chance to discover the birds in your neighborhood and "Count for the Record."

Sponsored by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, National Audubon Society and Wild Birds Unlimited, the count is conducted by novice and veteran birdwatchers of all ages across the United States and Canada at home, in schoolyards, at local parks or wildlife refuges, or wherever birds are seen that weekend.

Observers simply count the highest number of each species they see during an outing or a sitting, and enter their tally on the Great Backyard Bird Count web site at www.birdsource.org/gbbc.

Visitors to the web site can compare their sightings with results from other participants, as checklists pour in across the continent. Together, these counts offer a real-time snapshot of the numbers and kinds of birds that people are finding, from boreal chickadees in Alaska to anhingas in Florida.

The event combines the fun of bird watching with conservation. The information collected helps scientists better understand bird population trends and can guide efforts to protect habitats.

To mark the tenth anniversary of the GBBC, the sponsors are challenging people everywhere to "Count for the Record" by participating in greater numbers than ever before. Last year, participants submitted more than 60,000 checklists and reported 7.5 million birds overall in 623 different species. The count helped chronicle the early spring migratory routes of sandhill cranes, documented lingering migrants such as orange-crowned warblers and tree swallows, revealed the ongoing range expansion of introduced Eurasian collared-doves, and recorded declining numbers of American crows.

Participants who want to hone their bird watching skills can learn more from the GBBC web site (http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/) which offers identification tips and access to photos, sounds, maps, and natural history information on more than 500 bird species.

Where do herps go in the winter?

Ever wonder in the winter time whatever happened to that toad, frog, or snake you saw in your yard last summer?

Reptiles and amphibians hibernate at this time of year in the truest sense of the term. Hibernation is a condition of dormancy and torpor found in cold-blooded vertebrates and invertebrates. Body temperatures of these animals drop in relation to environmental temperatures to conserve energy and use reserves stored in tissue during times when food is less available.

Some warm-blooded animals employ a semblance of hibernation at this time of year, but it's the cold-blooded creatures that truly hibernate because their body temperatures are not internally regulated.

Many terrestrial reptiles, such as lizards, snakes, and turtles, become dormant and hibernate by burrowing in crevices under rocks, logs, and in the ground below the frost line. Others immerse themselves in the mud at the bottom of a pond to escape the cold. Their metabolism markedly slowed, these wintering reptiles can sustain their need for oxygen by taking it in through the skin, which acts like gills.

Photo by Kelly McAllister

Freezing water ultimately destroys body cells and tissues. But frogs, salamanders, and turtles are able to survive, despite the reduction in body temperatures to just at or below freezing. As winter approaches, the water content of their tissues becomes reduced and the blood more concentrated.

To help your reptiles and amphibians make it through the winter, be sure to include piles of brush, logs, and rocks in your backyard sanctuary, and maintain natural mud sides and bottom in your backyard pond.

Feeders can draw color to your winter landscape, (cont. from page 1)

than their discovery of a newly dead tree full of bugs.

If you invite these colorful guests to a dinner party in your yard, however, be a responsible host by following a few rules of thumb:

- Keep feeders clean, dry and free of mold to prevent disease among birds; about every other week or so remove all feed, wash feeders in a 10 percent bleach solution, and allow to dry completely.
- Clean up spilled seed from the ground if ground-feeding birds aren't keeping up with it; too much piling up in wet conditions will grow mold and fungus that can harm birds. Avoid "bargain" seed mixes, which birds will sort through for their favorites and only create more waste.
- Place feeders where you can watch birds without being so close that your movements scare them away or they fly into windows; keep feeders either more than 15 feet or less than two feet away from windows.
- Prevent window collisions by attaching netting, streamers, or other materials on the outside of the glass, rubbing soap over the glass to dull it, or closing curtains at least partially.
- Place feeders near escape cover and high enough so that cats or other predators can't turn them into their own feeders; this is a delicate balance, since too much cover too close can allow a cat to ambush a bird.
- Keep the number of feeders to a minimum to avoid concentrating too many birds in a small area, leaving them vulnerable to stress, disease and predation.
- Use feeders designed to limit access by non-native competitors, like starlings or eastern gray squirrels. For example, provide thistle or sunflower seed in hanging tube feeders with small holes that only goldfinches, pine siskins, juncos and other small birds can use; offer suet in a covered cage that requires woodpeckers, chickadees, nuthatches and others to feed hanging upside down (excluding less acrobatic birds like starlings.)

Brainy birds stay here through winter

(Editor's note: A recent study found that resident birds have bigger brains than migrants. The following is excerpted from an article by Anne Marie Johnson in Cornell University's Project Feeder Watch bulletin.)

How can warblers and other long-distance migrants fly so far with such tiny brains? Some blackpoll warblers travel 10,000 miles from Alaska to Brazil and back each year. It may seem that their navigational abilities would require incredible intelligence.

However, a recent study suggests that resident birds may have even more smarts than migratory birds since they have figured out how to find food year-round despite dramatic seasonal changes.

Resident songbirds have larger brains than long-distance migrants, according to the study by McGill University researcher Daniel Sol and colleagues (Proceedings of the Royal Society, June 2005). The researchers also found that the resident birds were more inventive foragers, suggesting a possible link between bigger brains and the ability to find food in northern winters.

The study suggested that resident songbirds have relatively large brains—perhaps because they must be innovative to find food during northern winters.

Although long-distance migrants must navigate across thousands of miles, they have smaller brains than resident songbirds with similar body size.

Sol and collaborators compared data on the brain sizes of 105 songbird species from Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. After adjusting for the birds' body size, they found that long-distance migrants have smaller brains than short-distance migrants. Resident birds have the biggest brains of all.

The researchers also found that long-distance migrants tended to be less innovative in their foraging behaviors than short-distance migrants and residents. These results were based on data from 68 common breeding birds in the British Isles, where scientists have recorded extensive observations about the variety of foods the birds eat and their innovative approaches to finding food—such as using a twig to clear snow from a food source.

Sol et al. suggested that big-brained resident birds are able to develop new foraging techniques to help them find food in a wider variety of places than migratory birds. They point out that it is not yet known which came first—migration strategies or smaller brain size.

Photo by Kelly McAllister

The bigger brains and behavioral flexibility of resident birds may be what enabled them to avoid traveling thousands of miles each year in search of food. The researchers speculate that innovative abilities may also make resident birds more resilient against environmental changes, such as habitat destruction or global warming.

Still counting after all these years

Since 1955, federal and state wildlife biologists across the country have been counting waterfowl in early January to track populations and habitat use over time.

This year's Midwinter Waterfowl Survey (MWS) was conducted from the air and on the ground Jan. 2-5 by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) staff, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel and citizen volunteers at hundreds of sites across the state.

"In many cases this count provides the only estimate of waterfowl use for specific areas," said WDFW Waterfowl Section Manager Don Kraege of Olympia. "Surveys in Washington are part of a larger effort to obtain an annual wintering waterfowl population index for the Pacific Flyway."

WDFW wildlife biologist Michelle Tirhi of Tacoma noted that many of the count sites are in and around suburbia, so she enlists help in the task from Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary managers and other volunteer "citizen scientists."

"It's a great way for those interested in birds to learn more about our great variety of waterfowl in Washington," she said. "It's one of our most meaningful uses of citizen scientists. I hope we get even more participation next year."

Build it yourself now

Winter is a good time for Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary carpentry projects.

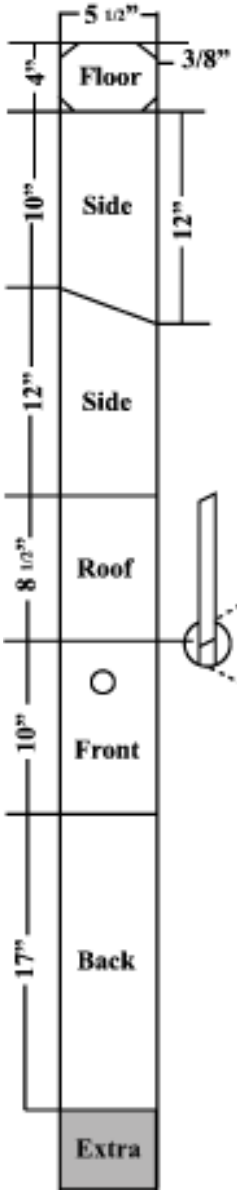
You don't have to be a carpenter or woodworker to create something to help wildlife in your backyard. Simple patterns and easy directions for building nest boxes, nest platforms, roost boxes, and feeders for everything from bats to flying squirrels to woodpeckers are available at http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/backyard/construction/index.htm .

The following plan is for a Basic Songbird Nest Box:

Materials

- One 1x6" x 6' rough cedar board
- Eighteen 1-1/4" outdoor wood screws or # 7 galvanized nails
- Wire to keep side door shut

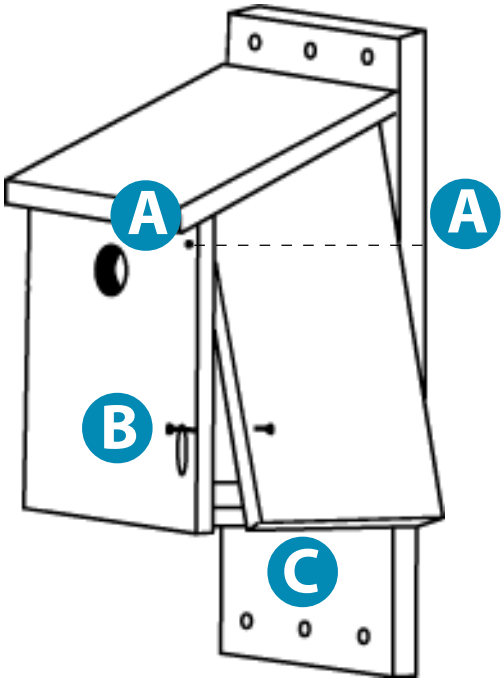
Lumber Detail



A Pivot screws work as hinges. To allow the side to open easily, the two pivot screws need to be level

B Loop wire around nails

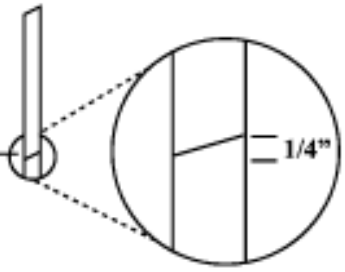
C Holes for attaching box to a tree or post with nails, lag bolts, or wire.



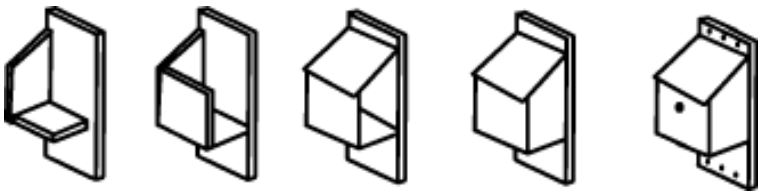
Exact Entry Hole Dimensions

Chickadees 1inch to 1 1/8" *
House wrens 1 1/8" *
Violet-green swallows 1¼" *
Tree swallows 1¼"
Nuthatches 1¼" *
Bluebirds 1½"

*** See Optional Entry Hole**



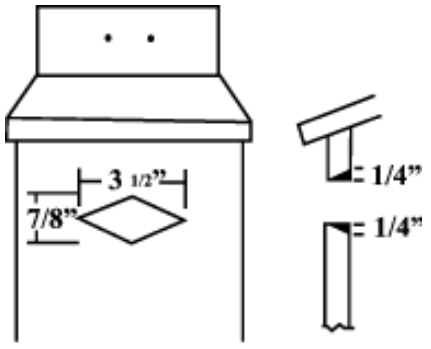
Detail of two slant cuts



Assembly Sequence

* Optional Entry Hole

NOTE: This diamond-shaped entry hole is designed to prevent access by house sparrows. To work properly, it is extremely important that the final entry hole be made to these dimensions. To accommodate **Violet-green Swallows**, file down the area inside of the entry hole, as shown in the side view.



Front view Side view

Alien berries may not be best for birds


Himalayan blackberries

Although winter fruit-eating birds may be feasting now, alien or non-native berry-producing plants may not be the best thing for birds in the long term.

The fruits of non-natives like cotoneasters, Pyracantha, European mountain ashes, Himalayan blackberries, and English holly, laurel, ivy, and yews might be enjoyed by robins, waxwings, starlings and other birds. But the spread of these plants displaces native vegetation that ultimately supports a greater diversity of wildlife.

That idea was recently expressed by West Seattle ecological consultant Stewart Wechsler in birding e-mail exchanges, and supported by WDFW wildlife biologist Russell Link.

"In the long term, after the (birds) sprinkle the seeds all over the landscape with little packets of fertilizer, these alien shrubs and trees replace the native plants, and in turn displace the other native organisms best adapted to living with those native plants, and we get less biodiversity," Wechsler wrote. "This most likely includes fewer of some of the very bird species that eat these berries."

The interconnections are complex. Wechsler explained most song birds primarily feed their young moth and butterfly caterpillars, which grow on specific native host plants. If those host plants are displaced by non-native plants, there's less food for young birds. Whether adult resident or migratory birds use winter berries or not, this decline in forage for young ultimately leads to a decline in birds.

Wechsler advocates pulling up existing non-native plants and replacing them with native fall and winter berry-producers, which include Douglas (black) hawthorn, blue elderberry, Pacific crabapple, bald-hip rose, evergreen huckleberry, tall Oregon grape, salal, and western serviceberry.

Leave no child inside

With a goal to reverse trends of children disconnecting from outdoor play and interest in natural resources, a National Forum on Children and Nature will be launched in February.

Chaired by governors and involving corporations and environmental groups, the forum will identify and implement 20 nationally significant demonstration projects in the areas of health, education, the built environment and media/culture. The Conservation Fund, a non-profit organization, is providing an initial $1 million for these projects. At least another $20 million will be raised from a variety of public, private and charitable organizations. New projects, or investments in existing projects, will be announced in early 2008.

The effort began last year when The Conservation Fund teamed with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Richard Louv, the author of the best-selling book "Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder," to talk about ways to reconnect children and nature.

Recognition of the issue has spawned other initiatives. Last year Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire signed legislation funding a study to measure how outdoor education affects academic achievement, career development and personal responsibility. Martin LeBlanc, the Sierra Club's National Youth Education director, who helped support the legislation, is also working with Washington's IslandWood School to make sure

that every Seattle fifth-grader receives an outdoor education experience.

For more information, see http://www.cnaturenet.org/01_news.html.

Wildlife licenses, (cont. from page 1)

license renewal fee. Now that implementation costs are behind us, $28 from the sale of each wildlife-theme license plate will be deposited in the State Wildlife Fund for specific wildlife-management programs.

Funds collected from the sale of the elk, bear and deer plates will be spent on habitat improvements, population enhancement, and improved population monitoring. Eagle plate funds help communities and organizations develop or improve wildlife-viewing opportunities. Orca plate proceeds are used for population-recovery and habitat restoration efforts for endangered species.

You can help with this important work by joining me in purchasing an eagle license plate— or any of the other wildlife-theme license backgrounds— when your car, truck, motorcycle, RV or trailer license is due for renewal.

Beginning in September, you'll also have the opportunity to combine a wildlife-license background with a personalized-license plate. Personalized license plates have long supported WDFW's Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary program and this newsletter, among other wildlife-diversity programs. You can choose up to seven characters to create your own personalized message.

To find out more about ordering your wildlife background and personalized license plate, contact your local vehicle licensing office, or see the Washington Department of Licensing website at http://www.dol.wa.gov/vehicleregistration/specialplates.html .

Thanks for helping wildlife with your license plate purchases. You're not only improving the future of our state's wildlife, but you're also spreading your enthusiasm for Washington wildlife everywhere you drive. In a very real sense, you are moving Washington forward.

New BWS yard signs available

Newly designed Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary weather-proof yard signs are available for those enrolled in the program.

Up to two new signs can be purchased for $4 each, including mailing, either from WDFW's Mill Creek office (16018 Mill Creek Blvd., Mill Creek, WA 98012-1541, 425-775-1311) or Spokane Valley office (2315 N. Discovery Place, Spokane Valley, WA 99216-1566, 509-892-1001).